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## **Reconsidering critical performativity**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of ‘critical performativity’, a concept designed to debate relationships between theory and practice and encourage practical interventions in organizational life. Notwithstanding its laudable ambition to stimulate discussion about engagement between CMS researchers and practitioners, we are concerned that critical performativity theory is flawed as it misreads foundational performativity authors, such as Austin and Butler, in ways that nullify their political potential, and ignores a range of other influential theories of performativity. It also overlooks the materiality of performativity. We review these limitations and then use three illustrations to sketch out a possible alternative conceptualization of performativity. This alternative approach, which builds on Butler’s and Callon’s work on performativity, recognises that performativity is about the constitution of subjects, is an inherently material and discursive construct, and happens through the political engineering of sociomaterial agencements. We argue that such an approach – a political theory of organizational performativity – is more likely to deliver on both theoretical and practical fronts than the concept of critical performativity.

### **Keywords**

Butler, Callon, Critical management studies, Critical performativity, Engagement, Materiality, Performativity as politics

## Introduction

Three papers published in *Human Relations* (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) aim to develop a concept of ‘critical performativity’ specifically applicable within management and organization studies (MOS) in general, and critical management studies (CMS) in particular. Designed to debate relationships between theory and practice, these papers (hereafter referred to together as Critical Performativity Theory: CPT) encourage practical interventions in organizational life through ‘more performativity’. Although sharing its ambitions towards practical interventions, our worry is that CPT provides a rather limited understanding of performativity in MOS, and so embeds a degree of misunderstanding that risks nullifying the political impact of the concept. Thus, our arguments in this article do not so much dismiss CPT as provide an alternate reading of performativity which better enables efforts to take on the issues that these earlier essays intended to address.

CPT responds to Fournier and Grey’s (2000: 7) widely-cited claim that a defining characteristic of CMS is its ‘anti-performative stance’ (we discuss definitions of ‘anti-performative’ below). CPT argues that those who ‘adopt [this] anti-performative stance ... hardly engage with those they criticize – predominantly managers’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 108) and seeks radical change in managerial practices through engagement with managers. This requires ‘shifting our understanding of what performativity means’, and developing a ‘more fruitful way of conceiving of performativity [that] draws on the work of J.L. Austin and Judith Butler’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 538), so as to encourage managers to engage in ‘reflexive conscientization [to] provide spaces that “activate” the performativity of language and thus lead towards behavioural change’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 121). ‘[A]ctive intervention into discourse and practice’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 543) will bring about

political change in organizations if ‘CMS was to think of itself as a performative enterprise, [whose] central aim would be to actively and subversively intervene in managerial discourse and practices’ (Spicer et al, 2009: 544). Practical engagement may involve:

‘Locat[ing] points within [managerial] practice with liberating potential. The logic is to proceed from our informants’ practices and experiences and then expand horizons through selective and informed critical-constructive questioning... [A focus on] digging out the mixed and ambivalent metaphors that are already at work within [management]’ is one way forward’ (2009:546/7).

Rather than advocating ‘anti-performativity’, CPT therefore promotes:

‘...active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices. This is achieved through affirmation, care, pragmatism, engagement with potentialities, and a normative orientation [to ....] create social change through productive engagement with specific theories of management’ (Spicer et al, 2009: 539).

Such arguments contribute to a developing consensus about the need for greater engagement with organizational life (e.g. Hartmann, 2014; King and Learmonth, 2015; Parker et al, 2014), implying a potential readership receptive to such ideas and keen to build on them. However, as we will demonstrate, CPT, to date, offers a somewhat confused, misleading and limited invocation of the term ‘performativity’ (be it ‘critical’, ‘progressive’ or ‘anti’ performativity) that inhibits the desired political potential of the concept. Were scholars to attempt to intervene in the ways suggested their interventions would, at best, have little impact.

This paper's aim, therefore, is to articulate what we believe to be a more fruitful reading of critical performativity, particularly as it engages with the intersection of theory and practice. We do this by summarising CPT's main message and then illuminating its failure to deal adequately with its theoretical foundations. This is not, we suggest, merely an academic failure, but one that embeds obstacles to achieving the practical changes sought by CPT. Then we sketch steps towards a possible alternative theory of performativity, using three illustrations to analyse some of the issues critical academics need to address if we are to engage better with managers and others in changing organizations.

### **The reduced political potential of CPT**

We next explore CPT's reading of anti-performativity, discuss the work of Austin and Butler and (what we believe to be) the mis-interpretations of these authors in CPT. We then introduce materiality to organizational performativity theory through drawing on one of the several influential theories of performativity ignored by CPT and developed by Actor-Network theorists such as Callon.

### **Lyotard (1984 [1979]) and Fournier and Grey (2000)**

CPT interprets Fournier and Grey's influential argument for an 'anti-performative stance' as meaning a position that abjures direct intervention. However, Fournier and Grey follow Lyotard (1984 [1979]):

‘A performative intent (Lyotard, 1984), here, means the intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input; it involves inscribing knowledge within means-ends calculation. Non-critical management study is governed by the principle of performativity which serves to

subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency ... CMS [on the other hand is anti-performative in that it] questions the alignment between knowledge, truth and efficiency.’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17).

Lyotard (1984 [1979]) problematizes the prestige and status accorded to forms of knowledge that enhance ‘performance’, meaning economic efficiency:

‘a generalized spirit of performativity ... [is today represented by an] equation between wealth, efficiency and the truth’ (1984: 45).

Lyotard critiques ‘the imperative ... [for knowledge to focus on] performance improvement’ (ibid), i.e. performativity, arguing it is a contestable ideological stance that generally serves the interests of elites. He clarifies in a footnote the distinction between his definition of ‘performative’ and that in JL Austin’s seminal work: the only point Lyotard shares with Austin is an almost coincidental use of a similar term:

‘The term performative has taken on a precise meaning in language theory since Austin. Later in this book, the concept will reappear in association with the term performativity (in particular, of a system) in the new current sense of efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio.’ (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]: 88n; emphasis added).

In sum, anti-performativity for Lyotard and Fournier and Grey means opposition to forms of knowledge exclusively serving economic efficiency. It is a call for greater knowledge about, and engagement with, problems generated by the conflation of knowledge with enhancement of economic efficiency. As such, we think that anti-performativity is worth defending.

## **Austin and Butler**

CPT is predicated upon ‘shifting our understanding of what performativity means’ through a ‘more fruitful way of conceiving of performativity [that] draws on the work of J.L. Austin and Judith Butler’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 538). But CPT’s interpretation of Austin’s and Butler’s work is problematic.

### *Austin’s work*

Austin’s (1962) book, *How to Do Things with Words*, introduced the neologism ‘performative’ utterance (Austin never used the term ‘performativity’). Even though, as the book proceeds, the caveats and complications tend to multiply, its basic claim seems simple enough. Not all speech acts are utterances of true or false sentences – what Austin calls a ‘constative’ speech act. Rather, some sentences are ‘performative.’ A performative utterance is one ‘in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying something we are doing something’ (1962: 12). Austin’s performatives bring about what they say. When certain other conditions are felicitous – the right context, and appropriate intention for example – performative sentences like ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’ or ‘I bet you a fiver it will be sunny tomorrow’ are not primarily true/false statements. They do things: marry a couple, place a bet or whatever. Thus, to advocate that ‘instead of fighting against performativity, CMS should seek to become more performative’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 554) is to encourage the impossible: one cannot exceed language. As McKinlay points out, ‘following Austin, one can be no more ‘anti’ performative than one can be “against” verbs or give only qualified approval to nouns’ (McKinlay, 2010: 138-139).

### *Butler's work*

CPT argues that Butler's work can be used by critical researchers to encourage managers to engage in 'reflexive conscientization [to] provide spaces that "activate" the performativity of language and thus lead towards behavioural change' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 121; see also Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). CPT's understanding of Butler's theory of performativity is encapsulated in the statement that for Butler:

'performativity is not just a matter of making use of words. It is also a process of performance ...[and] discourses need to be made performative ... [because] [t]hrough being made performative, discourses create spaces where we are able to rework them' (Spicer et al., 2009: 545).

It is important to note that in Butler's theory subjects do not 'make use of' words/discourses but are formed by and used within them. Where for Austin the subject who speaks precedes the speech in question, for Butler 'the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, [so] language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression' (Butler, 1997: 28). That is:

'Where there is an "I" who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that "I" ... Thus there is no "I" who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse ... and so speaking is always in some ways ... the melancholic reiteration of a language that one never chose, that one does not find as an instrument to be used, but that one is, as it were, used by, expropriated in ... (Butler, 1993: 242).



Furthermore, rather than Butler regarding performativity as ‘a process of performance’ (Spicer et al, 2009:45), Butler herself writes:

‘One is subjected and subjectified within discourses, and becomes a subject through performativity, which is not an act, nor a performance, but constantly repeated ‘acts’ that reiterate norms’ (Butler, 1993: 12; 240 ff.).

These different interpretations of performativity have implications for how academics may intervene in material ways in organizations. That is, discourses cannot be made performative because they are the very condition of performativity. However, as Butler indicates, that does not rule out the possibility of change. That is, it is impossible to be ‘more’ performative because without performativity there is no subject: performativity cannot be exceeded.

Performativity:

‘cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject.’ (Butler, 1993: 94-5).

Iterability, or ‘constantly repeated “acts”’ is fundamental to performativity – it is through iterability that the appearance of something that appears to precede language is constituted, but it is also through the inevitable failure to repeat acts in precisely the same way that possibilities for change appear. CPT’s silence on iterability thus needs to be made good in a more thorough-going development of CPT.

Similarly, while we support CPT's advocacy of 'misappropriation' and 'resignification' (Butler, 1997) so as to develop 'progressive performativity' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015), the political intent of these terms may be lost if they are not handled with care. Butler explores 'resignification' in order to facilitate the development of 'insurrectionary' (1997: 163) speech (a form of politics that challenges hate speech and its injurious force). Resignification requires pushing 'the limits of speakability' (1997:144) so as to misappropriate the 'interpellating performatives that are central to any project of the subversive territorializations and resignifications of dominant social orders' (1997:154). That is, performativity facilitates appropriation of terms for use by those denied justice and democracy (1997:158) to challenge prevailing forms of authority. It takes a stretch of the imagination to include managers within groups 'denied justice and democracy', leading to the question of why CPT focuses only on managers: should not critical scholars be engaging with staff, the professions, trade unions, the abjected, and so on, as well as trying to influence the servants of power? Thus there is a danger that CPT as currently defined offers a very soft politics of benign managerialism rather than that politics of emancipation that is the continuing focus of Butler's work (2004; 2009).

However, we applaud and support the development of CPT as a politics of engagement by critical management academics. Numerous authors in MOS now draw on theories of performativity, and Butler's work in particular, to explore organizational issues such as gendering (Rittenhofer and Gatrell, 2012) and managerial identities (Harding, 2003; Harding et al., 2014; Learmonth, 2005). Nevertheless, there have been few attempts to translate this body of work into political action. CPT therefore goes beyond other uses of performativity in MOS, in developing a political programme. But its development of that programme is weakened by the way it ignores the insights that come from deeper engagement with theories

of performativity, theories that should be drawn on to understand how academics can better engage in the material worlds of organizations. In what follows we therefore start the work of taking forward CPT, beginning with introducing materiality to CPT.

## **Materiality and other theories of performativity in CPT**

### *Engaging with materiality*

CPT has a very strong emphasis on discourse, and while actively intervening in managerial discourses is a worthwhile thing to do, organizations cannot be understood without cognizance of materiality, and materiality is as important within performativity theory as discourse. In Austin's thesis words require a 'felicitous' context if they are to be performative: the words 'you are now married' do not by themselves create the social fact of a marriage but need to be said in the right place by an actual person vested with the appropriate authority. As Bourdieu argues (1991: 75 [1987]): 'Austin's account of performative utterance cannot be restricted to the sphere of linguistics.'

Materiality is also fundamental to Butler's theory of performativity; the body's materiality arises in a matrix of power relations, and language itself is material: 'Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another' (Butler, 1993:69). However, her effort to understand the indissociability of matter and discourse is under-developed (Barad, 2007). Organizational critical performativity theorists therefore need to look beyond Austin and Butler to other theorists who explore the imbrication of discourses and materiality.

There is space only to intimate the potential offered by other theorists for a material/discursive approach to organizational performativity. We here introduce Callon's work to illustrate how to introduce materiality into CPT.

*Callon's performativity thesis and the role of sociotechnical agencements*

Callon, an Actor-Network Theorist, considers that Austin's thesis applies to all kinds of statements, including scientific statements and models. Scientific models or formula for instance are not constative statements – or statements 'outside the world or worlds to which [they] refer' – but are performative statements 'actively engaged in the constitution of the reality that they describe' (Callon, 2007: 318-319). Callon applies this line of enquiry to economics (Callon, 1998; 2007; see also: Callon and Muniesa, 2005; MacKenzie and Millo, 2003). Economics has a performative power in that it shapes economic and managerial practice, and 'influences social reality in such a way that its premises, and sometimes even its predictions, become true' (Cabantous and Gond, 2011: 578).

Callon insists on the importance of sociotechnical agencements – that is 'combination[s] of heterogeneous elements that have been carefully adjusted to one another' (Callon, 2007: 319) – and hence materiality. The actualization of a theory's world requires a work of 'articulating, experimenting, and observing ... [in order to] produce the gradual, mutual adjustment of socio-technical agencements and [model]' (Callon, 2007: 320). Thanks to this work, the 'world of the formula [or model] is actualized in such a way that it can be said that the formula [or model] describes and represents its world correctly' (Callon, 2007: 321). As Roscoe and Chillas (2014) write 'Callon insists on the materially embedded nature of economic calculation and sees economic process and agency as being constructed, or

performed, through the systematic use of devices and infrastructure through which economic theory has been written' (p. 800).

MOS scholars influenced by Callon emphasise the materiality inherent in performativity. Cabantous and Gond (2011) argue that one of the mechanisms contributing to the performativity of rational choice theory is engineering. Without the existence of material artefacts used in daily practice (e.g. decision-making tools, software and techniques), in which rational choice theory's assumptions are embedded, the theory would have insufficient power to change people's decision-making. Similarly, Roscoe and Chillas (2014) illustrate how theoretical premises underlying the design of material artefacts substantively affect behaviour. Dating agencies' clients now 'systematically treat online dating as an economic activity, as a form of consumption or 'relationshopping', quickly scanning large numbers of profiles' (2014: 811-812) through ways of interacting with on-line computer systems.

Thus, Callon's work brings to a theory of organizational performativity a specific encompassing of materiality, notably when considering socio-technical arrangements and thus non-human (material) actants. Callon (2013: 433-435) indicates the development of more political conceptualization of performativity through his work (see also Vosselman, 2014). Recent discussions between Butler (2010) and Callon (2010) point to the fruitfulness for MOS of building on both theorists' insights.

### **From abstruse theory towards engaged performativity**

We argued above that taking CPT forward requires deeper engagement with theories of performativity in order to ensure the political success of the more active engagement with managers and staff that CPT aims to achieve. We have suggested the need to introduce a

range of performativity theorists into CPT, notably those who are developing material / discursive theories of performativity, and illustrated, albeit briefly, what this might entail. We turn now to developing a more robust understanding of how better to engage with actors in the socio-material world of organizations. We pose six questions that are important in the planning stage of active engagement, and we find answers to them through three illustrations. This section of the paper therefore moves beyond critical understanding of current limitations in CPT, to offering insights into how to do that work recommended by CPT.

### **Illustration one: Who is the manager? – A Butlerian reading of The Corporation**

If CPT is to persuade managerial and other organizational subjects to lead change, we need first to understand who these subjects with whom we would wish to interact are. They are, of course, material, embodied beings that are subjectified within and through engagements in socio-technical-discursive-material practices, but our summary of performativity theory above shows the need to understand the terms within and through which subjects are performatively constituted, and where failures in the iterable constitution of those selves allow possibilities for intercession.

Two fundamental questions follow: ‘Who are you?’ (Q1); and ‘what are the conditions of the possibility of your becoming?’ (Q2). We illustrate potential answers to these questions through exploring material from the Canadian documentary film *The Corporation* (2003). We have chosen this film because its producers wished to make it widely available, and it can be accessed in full on You Tube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y888wVY5hzw>) . We focus specifically on commentaries from business people including CEOs who struggle but fail to be ethical. Sam Gibara, former CEO of Goodyear, states: ‘the perception is that you have absolute power to

do what you want, the reality is that you don't have that power'. The decisions he had to make as a CEO, he says, were dictated by 'circumstances', the 'consequences of modern capitalism'. Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, former CEO of Royal-Dutch Shell, talks about the need for CEOs to be seen as 'constructive members of society' who are constrained by their economic foundations: he wishes to protect the environment and promote human rights. Cynicism is too easy – we may learn more if we regard these speakers as powerful subjects who are, nonetheless, also powerless. As Chomsky points out in *The Corporation*, individual CEOs may really care about ethics but have the responsibility of being 'totally inhuman'. In Butler's (2004; 2009) terms, the powerful inhuman claim their own status as fully human by rendering others less than human. These CEOs, in this light, are bifurcated subjects who are both human (with feelings, emotions and desires to do good), and inhuman (pursuers of profit who render others as non-human objects). Butlerian theory suggests they move their be-suited bodies through corporate worlds whose very capillaries are imbricated with discourses of capitalism, and in so doing performatively constitute the managerial self as inhuman. In this subject position there is no language available in which to think and speak of anything but 'the bottom-line'. But when speaking as an ethical subject the CEO speaks from a different subject position, in which alternative discourses and materialities make possible different identities.

That is, when considering how to approach managers or other organizational actors in taking forward CPT, we cannot assume that managers (or employees, shareholders, etc.) are unitary subjects who can change themselves. Rather, they are complex subjects moving between subject positions where identity and agency is performatively constituted within and through different circulating discourses. They can espouse contradictory beliefs from within the contrasting subject positions they move between, and so can be both human and inhuman

(see Harding et al., 2014, for a discussion of subject positions). Thus a political theory of performativity needs to understand and then change the terms within and through which subjects constitute identities within organizational subject positions. That is, we should not focus only on change to spoken words, but to the identity-constituting, norm-infested discourses that precede subjects.

Further, organizations are themselves performatively constituted even as they constitute organizational subjects. We not only echo Butler in saying we should explore ‘how that necessity and banality [of ‘the bottom-line’ and organizational hierarchy] are established (performatively) through time, and how we understand the spatially distributed and temporally reiterative processes that characterize the performative agency of [organizational] subjects’ (Butler, 2010:184-5), we also echo Callon (2010:163) in suggesting ‘there is no single form of organization that imposes itself naturally and compellingly ... as the only one able to ensure the optimal functioning of [organizations]’. That is, we need to understand the constitution of the organizational stage within and through which organizational subjects are constituted. How are such effects as organizations ‘compounded through repetition’ and how is the performance of materials and discourses implicated in the ontological effect, ‘the organization’?

A political organizational theory of performativity therefore asks: ‘who are you?’ and ‘what are the conditions (material and discursive) through which the ‘you’ is performatively constituted?’. This second question requires understanding of the ontological effect that is ‘the organization’ and that constitutes the grid of intelligibility within which organizational subject positions become available. With answers to these questions we can start attempting



change, which will require intervention to change discourses. But how can discourses be changed?

**Illustration two: Changing the discourses through which organizational selves are performatively constituted – A reading of Pride**

We explore how discourses may change through posing our second pair of questions: How are the discursive/material subject and its material/discursive context imbricated within and through each other? (Q3); and How can we develop a space from which organizational subjects can constitute different subjectivities and speak and think differently? (Q4)

Our focus is the British film *Pride*, released in 2014. Again we are using publicly available materials so that our interpretation can be critiqued and taken forward. Although the film itself is a commercial production, now available to purchase, a discussion of it and a video of the real people involved in the encounters portrayed in *Pride* can be found at

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/31/pride-film-gay-activists-miners-strike-interview>.

Briefly, *Pride* enacts a point in history when British coal miners, aiming to save a nationalised industry under attack by a right-wing government, commenced a strike that was to last 51 weeks. Strikers and their families were reduced to extreme poverty. In London, a ‘Lesbians and Gays support the miners’ group’ was formed to raise funds for a Welsh mining community. At the time, homophobia was legitimate and governmentally-condoned. In March 1985 the miners returned to work defeated but the encounter between trade unionists and queer activists led to the Miners Union instigating actions that influenced radical changes in the legal and cultural position of homosexuality. *Pride* thus recalls a point in history when class politics subsided and identity politics rose. It provides insights into how materialities

(the HIV virus, sexualities, coal, mineworkers; government officers, shortage of food, etc.) and discourses (managers/workers/strikers/ government; sexualities/class/gender, etc.) performatively constitute identities and effects, and how discourses can change and be changed. The coal mining industry died, but attitudes towards homosexuality have changed so much that homophilia is now a signifier of modernity (albeit that stigma and phobia co-exist with the new dispensation).

Pride offers two major insights. Firstly, performativity cannot be understood without an analysis of power (Butler, 1997; Lukes, 2004). The imbrication of materiality and power is seen in defeat arising from strikers being (almost literally) starved back to work by a government that had prepared carefully for the strike. Organizations are political formations in which power circulates, informing the stage on which performativity takes place, so when analysing how subjects are subjected and subjectified power needs to be understood (Butler, 1997).

Secondly, Pride shows the emergence of political, social and cultural changes that have had far-reaching material effects on people's lives. Anti-discrimination legislation, rights to civil partnerships and marriage, and marked cultural change mean, at least in the UK, that the denigrated and discriminated against homosexual of the mid-1980s is in some ways a historical figure, even though not fully relegated to history. Here a new language becomes available through which performatively constituted identities are no longer abjected but proud. In relation to our question of how spaces can be developed in which organizational subjects can constitute different subjectivities and speak, act and think differently, Pride leads us to suggest that organizational subjects currently lack a language in which to speak about

themselves as denigrated. They speak of boredom, tedium, poor rewards and unacceptable conditions, but such language limits critique and possibilities for action.

A major task of a political organizational theory of performativity is therefore the development of a new way of speaking about organizations that can circulate throughout culture and challenge ontologies of organizations, work and workers. This language cannot be timid, it cannot be that of a tepid managerialism. Many CMS scholars who arrived in academia after working in industry were provided with a language through which we could articulate the impoverishment of our very being wrought by our previous employment. It has helped us think, act and speak differently. We should focus not only on publishing in academic journals, but also in ensuring that our radical language circulates in public spaces where it can be taken up and become part of everyday understanding of the world of work.

Illustration three: Which sociotechnical arrangements for promoting alternative organizational forms? A Callonian interpretation of the cooperatives incubators in Brazil. Our final illustration is a Callonian reading of the case of Technical Incubators for Popular Cooperative (ITCP) developed by academics from several Brazilian universities in the late 1990s to fight violence and improve the life of local communities. The first Technological Incubator for Popular Cooperatives (Incubadora Tecnológica de Cooperativas Populares – hereafter: ITCP) was a university sponsored initiative launched in 1995 by the Engineering Post-Graduate and Research Coordination at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (COPPE/UFRJ) in Brazil. Since its inception, numerous other universities have reproduced its model of incubation. This illustration makes explicit the inextricable intertwining of discourses and the material. It addresses two important questions raised in Callon's work: what interruptions can be made in the discourses within and through which subjects and organizations are performatively constituted? (Q5) And, which sociotechnical arrangements

allow CMS scholars to promote alternative organizational forms and type of management?

(Q6) In addition, it makes clear how academics and scholars can directly contribute to address urgent social needs.

The cooperative organizational model is an inspiring alternative to the corporate form because it is compatible with emancipatory normative ideals (Cheney, Cruz, Peredo & Naraserano, 2014). Very few scholars have attempted to develop cooperatives that sustain emancipatory ideals while remaining economically viable. An exception is Brazil's ITCP in which critically engaged scholars moved from theorization to engagement within the material realm, through supporting the development of workers cooperatives for remote and deprived communities (Leca, Gond and Barin-Cruz, 2014). Growing violence in the favela surrounding the campus of the Foundation Oswald Cruz (Fiocruz), culminating with bullets striking the wall of the foundation's main building, pushed academics to engage with the social issues undermining their neighbourhood, and stimulated the idea of recasting a 'ventures incubator' training for future capitalist entrepreneurs into a 'cooperatives incubator' supporting the development of cooperatives that would serve the needs of the most deprived communities (Leca et al., 2014). According to the web-site of the pioneering ITCP from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro: "its primary objective [is] the inclusion of economically marginalized sectors of the economy within the formal system". (See the organization website: <http://www.itcp.coppe.ufrj.br/ingles.php>.) It does so through the incubation of "cooperatives" targeting the social and economic needs of deprived populations.

The first incubator required the designing of specific sociotechnical arrangements that would build and transmit knowledge about management and politics, notably by developing technical toolkits. This was difficult: close cooperation with sometimes illiterate future

workers created unprecedented pedagogical challenges for scholars; there were tensions between trainers' focus on technical and managerial know-how and scholars advocating a stronger focus on political or emancipatory forms of knowledge as a priority teaching objective.

But success meant the first ITCP supported the development of several workers' cooperatives, and operated as a proper 'critical performativity engine' enabling the design of new cooperatives (Leca et al., 2014). The ITCP published in 1998 the 'Incucoppe' method as a handbook, a practical 'tool-kit' for designing other cooperative incubators. This model was then adapted and translated across multiple Brazilian universities that developed their own cooperative incubators, often using different ideological approaches to cooperativism, but always with the aim of supporting the development of cooperatives for workers from deprived communities. These ITCPs were then progressively networked to facilitate the circulation of knowledge, experience and incubating methods and techniques across cooperatives, consolidating the relationships between popular cooperatives and universities. Leca et al.'s (2014) Callonian reading of the case of the ITCPs illustrates how performing (or bringing into being) alternative organizational forms such as cooperatives involves designing sociotechnical arrangements, here the formal ITCP network, and the production of 'quasi-objects' (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) such as the Incucoppe handbook, to enable widespread translation of the cooperative model. The construction of both elements involved the concrete engagement of academics with the material realm of organizations, making possible the constitution of alternative discourses and practices supporting new identities and organizational forms.

A Callonian re-interpretation of the ITCP illustration suggests business schools are not necessarily bound to the consolidation of capitalist organizational forms: their central role in the contemporary ‘circuit of knowledge’ allows them to reshape the material and discursive realms to support alternative organizational ontologies. Their intervention into sociotechnical arrangements can help design alternative or complementary circuits of knowledge, or other ‘critical performativity engines’, supporting the emergence of alternative identities and organizations.

This third illustration hence suggests that political organizational performativity theory involves moving conceptualizations of performativity beyond the linguistic sphere and having scholars engaging actively in the design and transformation of sociotechnical arrangements to enable the emergence of alternative organizational identities and practices.

### **Discussion and conclusion: Towards CPT as a political theory of organizational performativity**

This paper originated because of our concern with how an increasingly influential critical performativity theory introduces into management and organization studies a reading of performativity that misreads the theories it claims as its inspiration and ignores an important alternative reading of performativity. CPT neglects both performativity subjects – it overlooks the constitution of subjects through discourse, and performativity objects – it fails to recognize the materiality of discourse in performative processes. In doing so the current CPT approach damages the political and interpretive power of performativity. We do not wish this paper to be solely a critique, and indeed we applaud the aims of CPT, and so we have started to build on the groundwork started by CPT but by making it a more political theory better informed by a range of performativity theories. We recognized the

inherently political nature of this concept and aimed to encourage the development of more powerful ways of intervening in organizations by considering performativity's material dimension. Central to this alternative conceptualization of performativity which blends the Butlerian and Callonian insights are three guiding principles: (a) performativity is about the constitution of subjects and not only about what is discursively performed by specific subjects (e.g., managers); (b) performativity is both material and discursive and cannot be bounded to the sphere of language; (c) performativity happens through the political engineering of socio-material agencements that are constituted within and across organizations, institutions and markets, it is not solely limited to discursive interventions. Academics and academic institutions can play a key role in designing, hosting or enabling the development of such socio-technical agencements.

We posed six questions, and used three illustrations to develop answers, to show how such a consolidated view on performativity can help identify important insights that encourage understanding of the organizational subjects with whom we engage, the discursive and material conditions that make possible the emergence of such subjects, or the imbrication of the material and discursive within and through each other. Importantly, the more political theory of CPT that emerges from our analysis is that there is no such unitary subject as 'the manager', 'employee', and so on. Rather there are performatively constituted subjects who speak and think differently as they move between subject positions. But, those organizational subject positions are made possible through organizational ontologies that need challenging – the ways in which it is possible to speak about organizations needs expanding to encompass possibilities that are currently almost unthinkable. We therefore need to change the terms through which organizations and organizational subjects are speakable, thinkable and apprehend-able. This task cannot be accomplished without an understanding of power. Our

third illustration, from Brazil, showed how scholars can start this process through embedding the discursive within the material and the material within discourse, drawing all the time on the language of the business school, but subtly changed so that its ends become not the pursuit of profit, power and ‘the bottom-line’ but the flourishing of local communities. Along the way we have suggested some of the ontological “truths” about organizations that need changing: hierarchies elevate the few at the expense of the many; leaders can only exist if others, followers, are defined as being so deficient in some ways that they need someone to literally show them the way (“sharing the vision”) of being led. A theory of performativity that attempts to change, say, managers without first changing such conditions in which managers are made possible is a theory of a practice that will, from a critical perspective, fail. We think our alternative conceptualization of performativity can position organizational and critical scholars at the forefront of important current debates about performativity. On the one hand, this view of performativity is well aligned with the current recognition of the inherently political and critical nature of performativity by authors working in an actor-network theory perspective (Callon, 2013; Hassard and Cox, 2013) and studying the role of management accounting devices (Vosselman, 2014) or how alternative forms of capitalism can be turned into social reality (Leca et al., 2014). On the other hand, this approach can capitalize on and move further the cross-fertilization of the performativity streams of studies engaged by Butler (2010) and Callon (2010) with the aim to analyze ‘performativity as politics’ (Cochoy, Giraudeau and McFall, 2010).

In sum, a more political theory of organizational performativity suggests critical scholars are already doing some of the work of challenging ontologies and changing discourses, through their research and publications, but these are not circulating widely. Inserting these critical discourses into the general ways of thinking about organizations in the



wider culture is therefore an imperative. We are story-tellers to a small community; we need to become the story-tellers to entire cultures so that we can make the unthinkable generally thinkable.

But this is only some of the work. Preparatory work may be necessary. We have suggested this involves making fissures in the discourses and norms that govern the constitution of organizations and organizational practices, thus changing the conditions of possibility for being and becoming organizational subjects. It requires making 'normal' what is currently abnormal or unthinkable. Perhaps we should start by exploring our own unfathomable acquiescence in the increasing managerialism of the academy. How could a political organizational theory of performativity account for the supine academic who talks about action but spurns it on her own door-step? How could such a theory help us engage in changing the terms through which we constitute the academy and ourselves as academics?

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